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ABSTRACT

Features of connected discourse that have been identified by discourse analysis may be applied to the evaluation of oral proficiency in a second language. For example, in the area of semantics, a speaker's control of the cause-result relationship involves, among other things, the ability to produce the different grammatical and lexical manifestations of this relationship. Evaluation of the many possible ways of expressing a relationship as in the sentence "He died of malaria" could be based on a scalar norm with age and education variables. The ability to make inference from texts is another testable skill. In the realm of phonological cohesion, the ability to place stress on the proper element according to the preceding context is an element of discourse competence that needs to be evaluated. Other examples of cohesion that can be evaluated in a discourse context are pronominalization and classification of lexical items within a hierarchy. Finally, the evaluation of oral language ability will consider the staging system, the set of strategies available for communicating semantic choices. Among the methods available for such an evaluation are comprehension questions, paraphrase in context, and text production. Norms for evaluating discourse may be absolute or variable; the norms will be established on stylo-statistical principles. (JB)

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Discourse Factors in the Evaluation of Language Ability

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DISCOURSE FACTORS IN THE EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE ABILITY

by

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Introduction

The 1970's saw a shift away from the earlier emphasis upon syntax and phonology as the dominant concerns of linguistics to a broader view of the nature of language. One significant change was to extend the domain of linguistics beyond the narrow scope of formalizing the generation of sentences to a theory of discourse that explains the production and comprehension of natural language. Although discourse analysis was the origin of transformational linguistics (Harris 1952), interest in discourse in the 1950's and 1960's was limited to non-transformational schools of linguistics (Pike 1954, 1967; Longacre 1968; Gleason 1968; Halliday 1967, 1968). In the 1970's the study of discourse became interdisciplinary with contributions from linguistics (Grimes 1975; van Dijk 1977), artificial intelligence (Bobrow and Collins 1975; Schank and Abelson 1977), cognitive psychology (Just and Carpenter 1977), sociolinguistics (Linde and Labov 1975) and anthropology (Agar 1979). A new journal Discourse Processes reflects the importance of this multidisciplinary approach to discourse.

Discourse is important for the evaluation of language competence and performance in that it is the domain of natural language usage. Discourse competence extends beyond the proper use of phonological, lexical, and syntactic rules to generate sentences, to the ability to communicate in dynamic situations where one must consider cultural knowledge, the constantly changing linguistic context and an on-going evaluation of the partners in the communication act in order to make the linguistic production meet the demands of the situation. The fact that discourse provides the necessary data for the analysis of natural language means that it must be taken into account if evaluations of language competence and performance are to be adequate. The complex nature of discourse plus our limited understanding of its operation makes the task of the language evaluator all the more difficult. However, we must not allow this to prevent us from developing evaluation theory and procedures based upon discourse data. In this paper I will discuss some of the features of discourse relevant to evaluating language ability and suggest some evaluation procedures.

Approaches to Discourse

There are two basic approaches to discourse. Frederiksen (1977: 313) has termed these text-based and schema-based approaches. The text-based approach has developed primarily from the theoretical concerns of linguists. It emphasizes the linguistic structures in texts and the relation of sentences to their contexts. The schema-based approach relates more directly to the emphases of artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and anthropology, and explores discourse from the perspective of the prior knowledge that is utilized in understanding a text and in the manner in which knowledge obtained from a text is processed for semantic memory. Both approaches are relevant for developing language evaluation theory and procedures in that they relate language production and comprehension to their appropriate linguistic and non-linguistic contexts.

In discussing discourse, I will follow the general model suggested by Grimes (1975: 112) but use some different terms and extend the domain to which they refer. Grimes discusses three relationships in discourse: content, cohesion and staging. Content refers to what is generally termed semantics and includes reference and case, propositional and rhetorical relations and possibly modality. I will use the term semantics for this area of discourse and extend it to include non-textual cultural information that the speaker-hearer brings to the production or understanding of discourse. This non-textual information has been given numerous names such as scripts, schemata and frames. Under this term could also be included much of what is discussed as pragmatics.

Cohesion is that system within discourse that unites the elements within [illegible] to form a unified structure (Halliday and Hasan 1976). It is what makes a set of sentences a text instead of a set of unrelated sentences. Linguistic studies of the relation between given and new information is in the domain of cohesion. Cohesive relations are expressed in the phonological, grammatical and lexical systems of language.

The staging system provides the lexical, grammatical and phonological instruments by which the speaker is able to signal the relative importance of elements within the discourse. This system distinguishes what is prominent from what is non-prominent, foreground information from background information, thematic content from non-thematic content. It extends beyond sentence thematization or topicalization as formulated in the Functional Sentence Perspective school of linguistics to include relative prominence from a global perspective.

These three systems are interrelated even though for the purposes of analysis, instruction, or evaluation we may need to view each independently. They also need to be viewed from different perspectives. Many semantic and grammatical relations within discourse are hierarchical. Many cohesive relations are best understood from a network perspective. On the other hand, discourse production and reception take place in channels that have physical time and space restrictions (writing and speech) which require us to consider also the linear nature of discourse.

In the section that follows I will discuss selected topics in these three areas of discourse that are relevant to evaluations of language ability.

Semantics

In the discussion of semantics in discourse I will restrict myself to the areas of rhetorical relations, inference, schemata, and story structures. Reference, case relations and predicates are also related to discourse but because these are more traditional in the linguistic literature I will not discuss them here.

Rhetorical relations are called rhetorical predicates by Grimes (1975). I have further divided these into two subsets: logical relations and set relations (Litteral 1977). Logical relations include the relations of cause-result, purpose, conditions, adversative, alternative and conjunction.[1] Set relations include identification, attributive, generic-specific, setting, equivalence and analogy.

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[1] For another analysis of logical relations see Frederiksen 1975.

For the purposes of our discussion let us look at the cause–result rhetorical relationship. This semantic relationship indicates that one or more states or events precede and cause one or more consequent states or events. This semantic relationship may exist between two clauses, e.g., "He cut the tree and it fell." or between the sections of a book, e.g. a book with chapters on the causes of inflation and the result.

A speaker's adequate control of the cause–result rhetorical relationship involves the ability to: (1) produce the different grammatical and lexical manifestations of this relationship, (2) infer this relationship when it occurs in text and (3) use the appropriate forms considering the discourse genre and the audience. (1) could be evaluated by providing a speaker with two kernel, or simple, sentences and asking the speaker to express the cause–result relationship in as many ways as possible. Sample results might be:

He had malaria and died.

He died because he had malaria.

Because he had malaria he died.

He died of malaria.

The cause of his death was malaria.

He died. It was caused by malaria.

Malaria caused his death.

Evaluation would be based on a scalar norm with age and education variables.

The ability to infer a cause–result relationship when it is specified grammatically or lexically can be tested by text related questions and by paraphrase. Given a text such as, "Dad talked to an old friend on the way home from the bus. He got home late for dinner and Mother was mad at him." 'why' questions about the story would test a person's ability to make cause–result inferences. If numerous retellings of the story are given, a person who is able to make the proper inferences might specify the cause–result relationship in one of his paraphrases, e.g., "Dad talked to an old friend on the way home from the bus and so he got home late and that made Mother mad."

Another component of the semantic competence of a speaker is the ability to make text inferences. In normal texts much information that is needed for understanding the text is implied and not made explicit so that the hearer/reader must supply the missing information by the inferences he makes. Learning to make the appropriate inferences is an essential task in becoming competent in a language.

Crothers (1978) classifies text inferences into three types according to the semantic items involved: propositions, elements of propositions and connectives between propositions. To avoid a complicated description of semantic terminology let us assume that a proposition has as its grammatical counterpart a clause, that the element corresponds to a noun or verb, and that the connective corresponds to a conjunction.[2] These inference types can best be illustrated from my personal experience in trying to understand a simple

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[2] His term 'logical connective' is essentially the same as what I discussed above as a logical rhetorical relationship.

children's story in Anggor, a vernacular language of northwestern Papua New Guinea that my wife and I have attempted to learn. The story goes basically as follows:

A sulfur-crested cockatoo and an mbon bird go out to prepare sago starch from the sago palm. The cockatoo scrapes the sago palm and the mbon washes the starch out. The cockatoo starts heating stones on a fire and the mbon goes and looks for insects. The cockatoo says, "Bring the water". The mbon replies, "The water is dirty". Again the cockatoo says, "Bring the water" and the mbon replies, "The water is dirty". Then they get the water, carry it to the stones, toss them in the water and pour the hot water into the sago starch. They stir and stir and stir the mixture and the sago starch settles. The cockatoo turns around and dumps a bark bucket of the water on the mbon. The mbon turns around and dumps the bark basket with the sago mixture on the cockatoo. The cockatoo flies off to a nut tree and the mbon flies off to a vine.

After asking many questions about this text, I can now specify some of the inferences that must be made in order to properly understand the story.

They prepare sago starch in order to make sago pudding.

Propositional inferences:

The mbon looked for insects in the water (which is why the water was dirty).

Waiting causes the stones to cool.

Cool stones will not boil water.

Sago pudding must be made with very hot water.

The dirty water made the mbon black (it is a black bird).

The sago starch water (white) made the cockatoo white.

Some elements within propositi ns that must be inferred are:

Sago starch is prepared with a stone pointed adze.

Hot rocks are put in water with tongs.

Sago starch is extracted in a washing trough.

Water is carried in a bark bucket.

The logical connectives that must be inferred are primarily the sequential connective 'then' between most of the events plus the adversative 'but' must be inserted between 'they stirred the sago water' and 'it settled' (they stirred and stirred but it settled, it did not set).

The necessity of using text inference for understanding texts indicates to us that an adequate view of competence must extend beyond the concept of grammatical rules to include those processes that enable us to comprehend natural language. This competence extends beyond purely abstract linguistic knowledge to include cultural knowledge and avoids the artificial separation of language from culture.

A schema theory (also referred to as macro-structure (van Dijk 1977)) of text comprehension would extend the knowledge required for comprehending a text beyond that of the ability to make text inferences to cultural knowledge

of procedures and story structure. Scripts (Schank and Abelson 1975) refer to the general cultural knowledge of specific procedure that members of a culture possess. The knowledge available in a script enables the speaker to tell a story without providing all the details, with the hearer understanding what took place because he too shares the cultural knowledge of the script. Examples of scripts would be the procedures of eating in a restaurant, making sago, and teaching a class. Story schemata includes the information that there is a hero plus other roles, that events are temporarily and causally related, that events are grouped into episodes, and plot consists of an exposition, complication and resolution (Kintsch and Green 1978). Grimes (1972) points out that there are different rhetorical structures in presenting knowledge. One such structure is the outline in which content is presented in a hierarchical manner with points and subpoints. Another rhetorical structure is the overlay in which content is presented in a series of repetitions, or planes, with each repetition repeating some information as well as adding some new information. Research indicates that knowledge of story schemata influences the ability to recall stories (Kintsch and Green 1978) and that competence in the area of story schemata varies with age (Mandler 1978).

To summarize, competence in the domain of discourse semantics includes the abilities: (1) to produce the grammatical and lexical manifestations of rhetorical relationships, i.e., the ability to paraphrase and to infer such relationships from text, (2) to make inferences from text with respect to propositions, elements in propositions and connectives between propositions and (3) to comprehend texts utilizing schemata, or macro-structures, and to produce texts with such structures.

Cohesion

Cohesion is the relationship between elements in a text that form separate units into a cohesive whole. Cohesive relations are expressed in the phonology, grammar and lexicon. Stress placement in English may separate new information from given information that occurs earlier in the text. Non-falling intonation contours indicate that information with which they co-occur is closely linked to information that follows. Grammatical cohesion consists of the processes of pronominalization, ellipsis, repetition of clauses and structural parallelism. Lexical items in discourse are related cohesively in three ways: (1) by membership in a common semantic domain such as father, mother and child; (2) by collocation such as the occurrence of the word ax in a context with chop; and (3) by lexical cycling where large sections of a text are repeated in a folktale or in the planes of an overlay.

In the realm of phonological cohesion and discourse competence the ability to place stress on the proper element according to the preceding context needs to be evaluated. The articulation of stress and its movement within a sentence can be taught in isolation. However, to place a stress on the proper element in a sentence requires sensitivity to the new-given relationship in the text as well as to the place where the hearer presumably retains the item in his memory (Chafe 1974; Allerton 1978). For example, "I saw 'John in a' hotel," with nuclear stress on both 'John' and 'hotel' indicates that both are new information. However, if the stress on 'John' is non-nuclear while that on 'a hotel' remains nuclear, then 'John' is no longer treated as new information but as given information. Certain lexical relationships such as that of the part to the whole can cause the second of two lexical forms to be treated as given and without stress, e.g., "The storm broke my 'window'." "Do you have 'insurance on your house'?" In this

example 'window' is part of the 'house' and so the occurrence of 'house' causes it to be considered given even though it has not occurred previously in the text.

Pronominalization is an example of grammatical cohesion that can only be evaluated in a discourse context. Pronominalization is the process by which an item introduced by a noun is referred to in other places in the text by a pronoun or by no referential form at all, e.g., "John came and visited us and then he went to the store and ∅ bought some groceries." 'John' is replaced by 'he' in the second clause and by '∅' (no referential form) in the third clause. A competent speaker of English not only knows that he cannot keep repeating the word 'John' but must use a pronoun to avoid the implication that there is more than one John, but he also knows when it is appropriate to reintroduce the full noun form 'John'. The speaker must also know that when no pronoun is used in a clause after a clause with a pronoun, a purpose relation is usually implied, e.g., "John went and bought some groceries" implies that John went in order to buy some groceries whereas a pronoun in the second clause does not necessarily give that implication "John went and he bought some groceries". In fact, the second example may sound artificial. In some Papua New Guinea languages such as Anggor the use of free pronouns is very infrequent, being used primarily for emphasis, with most referential information carried by pronominal affixes on the verb. In Anggor a clause with only the verb h-ah go-I 'I go' would occur much more frequently in discourse than a clause with the free pronoun ro h-ah I go-I 'I go'. Again we see that proper grammatical usage can only be determined within the context of discourse.

Lexical items in a hierarchical relation to each other have an important function in providing cohesion in discourse. One aspect of language competence is the ability to classify lexical items according to their place in the indigenous taxonomic system. A person with a basic knowledge of English ethnobotany would know that coconut and date trees are palms, that palms and evergreens are trees, and that trees and flowers are plants, and that plants and animals are living things. This hierarchy goes from specific to general: coconut, palm, tree, plant, living thing. Such hierarchical relationships are used in English discourse to provide cohesion. For example, in a text about the economic significance of coconuts in the South Pacific, one might find the following terms used to refer to the coconut: 'coconut', 'this palm', 'this tree', and 'this plant'.

Cognitive competence with respect to the lexical hierarchy means that a person can place the respective lexical items in their appropriate positions in the lexical hierarchy. This may require extensive learning for language students as lexical hierarchies differ extensively across languages. For example, in Anggor there are only two levels with respect to birds: bird plus the names of individual birds. There is no more inclusive term such as 'animal' nor are there intermediate terms such as 'parrot' and 'hawk'. One type of evaluation of a speaker's performance would consist of checking his use of hierarchically related lexical terms as a cohesive strategy for coreference. One hypothesis that could be tested is that speakers of languages with few levels in their lexical hierarchies would use lexical hierarchical relations less as a cohesive strategy when speaking or writing English than would native English speakers. Speakers with such languages as their mother tongue might prefer a pronominal strategy instead, i.e., they would tend to use 'coconut', 'it', 'it', 'it' instead of 'coconut', 'palm', 'tree' when referring to a coconut tree in a text.

Staging

The final system that we need to consider in evaluating language ability with respect to discourse is the staging system. Staging as used by Grimes (1975: 323f) refers to strategies available for communicating semantic choices. The speaker has different options available to him in the phonological, lexical and grammatical systems for communicating to his audience the relative importance of different items in the text. Callow (1974) uses the term 'prominence' to specify this function in discourse. Linguistic phenomena such as 'topic', 'focus', 'theme', 'emphasis', 'foregrounding' and 'perspective' are all within the domain of staging. Although such phenomena have been analyzed largely in terms of sentence grammars, their proper function can only be understood in their discourse contexts. There is evidence that improper staging of discourse content affects recall (Clements 1979).

Contrastive stress is a well known example of phonological staging. The element within the sentence that receives contrastive stress is made prominent. However, the element that is made prominent by contrastive stress is determined by the discourse context plus the new unexpected information provided (Chafe 1976).

The utilization of grammatical structures for staging functions has been well covered in the linguistic literature (Halliday 1967, 1968; Kuno 1972; Haiman 1978) under such subjects as 'theme and rheme' and 'topic and comment'. I will discuss three areas where the grammatical system relates to discourse staging: referents, types of information and connectives.

Languages have within their grammatical systems structures that enable the speaker to signal what the important referents are in the text that he is producing. The relation between subject and theme in English is one such instance. Take, for example, an event in which someone hits a ball. If the person has been the discourse prominent referent, this referent would continue as such by marking it as the theme of the sentence by making it the subject, e.g., "John hit the ball". However, if the 'ball' has been the prominent referent, or discourse topic, then it would probably become the subject to maintain its prominence, e.g., "The ball was hit by John".

Prominent referents in discourse are largely determined by two factors: inherent prominence and type of discourse. Humans are inherently more prominent than animals, animals more prominent than inanimate objects, and inanimate objects more prominent than locations. This may be modified, however, by the type of discourse in which the referents occur. In narrative discourse participants are generally most prominent. However, if one is describing a city (a descriptive discourse), locations become important, or foregrounded, whereas any animate or human referents generally are secondary, or backgrounded, as they are included because of the details they add concerning the locations.

Languages differ significantly as to the manner in which they signal prominent referents. English uses the subject of the clause as the normal strategy but also has other prominent referent strategies such as "It was John who ...", "John was the one who ...", and "John, he ...". Many Papua New Guinea languages have affixes on the verb that signal to the hearer whether the prominent referent of the following clause is the same or different from that of the clause in which that verb occurs. Demonstratives are another means of indicating discourse prominent referents, e.g., 'this city', or 'that chemical'.

Different types of information have different grammatical manifestations in discourse according to whether they are prominent or not (Grimes 1971, 1975). In narratives participant and event information are generally prominent. Information that provides identification or background is generally grammatically distinct from the participants and events. For example, if I tell about a canoe accident (event information) on the Sepik River and tell my audience where the Sepik River is (identificational information) there are definite grammatical restrictions as to how these two kinds of information can be expressed. I can put the information into two grammatical sentences: "I had a canoe accident on the Sepik River. The Sepik is one of the largest rivers in Papua New Guinea" or I can embed the identificational information "I had a canoe accident on the Sepik River, one of the largest rivers in Papua New Guinea". The two types of information cannot be appropriately combined in a coordinate sentence *"I had a canoe accident on the Sepik River and the Sepik is one of the largest rivers in Papua New Guinea". In this example the information that is non-prominent in the discourse is treated in a grammatically distinct manner from the prominent information. Notice that the same is true when an event becomes the non-prominent information: "The Sepik River, where I once had a canoe accident, is one of the largest rivers in Papua New Guinea" but not *"The Sepik River is one of the largest rivers in Papua New Guinea and I once had a canoe accident there."

There may also be degrees of prominence within the information that is normally prominent in a specific type of discourse. Events are normally the prominent information in narrative discourse, along with participants. However, some events are usually more important than others and are expressed as such in the grammar. The use of subordinating structures is one means of indicating less prominent events. These non-prominent events generally provide the setting or circumstances of the prominent events. When non-prominent events are deleted from a story, they do not affect the overall story to the extent that the deletion of prominent events do. Notice the different effects when one deletes the subordinate clauses and when one deletes the main clauses from the following simple story:

> While I was driving along I saw an injured man by the side of the road. After I put him in the car I took him to the hospital.

The story with the subordinate clauses deleted is: "I saw an injured man by the side of the road. I took him to the hospital". This form tells the basic story. But with the main clauses deleted, the basic story is lost: "I was driving along the road. I put him in the car".

In this section I have shown that discourse factors are essential for understanding the use of natural language. The three components of discourse that need to be analyzed are semantics, cohesion, and staging. In the following section I will discuss possible means of evaluating proficiency in discourse.

Evaluation of Discourse Proficiency

Two areas need to be considered in discourse proficiency evaluation: methods and norms. Methods for obtaining discourse evaluation data are comprehension questions, paraphrase in context frames and text production. Evaluation norms are absolute in certain cases, variable in others.

Methods

Comprehension questions have been used for evaluating reading comprehension, inference producing ability (Hildyard 1979), translation accuracy, and mutual intelligibility (Casad 1974). Comprehension question evaluations consist of a written or spoken text and a set of questions related to that text. The questions are such that the responses are clearly right or wrong, generally being WH- or yes-no questions. This procedure permits easy scoring but has limited value in evaluating general discourse proficiency in that it only tests passive ability and the most basic linguistic knowledge. It has been considered one of the most practical tools for evaluating the general language competence of a speech community (Casad 1974).

The paraphrase in context procedure permits the evaluation of language use within an appropriate context. The person being tested is asked to give a paraphrase for the meaning of an ambiguous form in that context or he is to choose the sentence of a paraphrase related set that is appropriate for that context. The former tests the ability to use contextual features for interpreting sentence meaning while the latter tests the ability to provide the appropriate cohesive and staging features for a sentence in context. For example, ability to disambiguate the triply ambiguous "It's too hot to eat" could be tested in contexts where the topics are the weather, cooked food and animals. In the same way, competence in controlling thematic information and new and given information needs to be tested in contexts with different themes, e.g., the appropriate use of "He gave the ball to me" or "He gave me the ball". Context frames can also be utilized to evaluate competence in lexical perspective, e.g., the use of 'buy' vs 'sell', 'win' vs 'lose' (Fillmore 1978; Allerton 1978).

The method that produces the best data in terms of naturalness and comprehensiveness is that of text production. The data consist of texts, whether in dialogue or monologues, written or oral, which the person being evaluated has produced. These data permit the evaluation of all aspects of discourse simultaneously. However, evaluation of such data is time consuming and of necessity is more subjective in that there are no generally established standards for measurement. Also the production of discourse permits wider limits of acceptable performance than does the generation of sentences.

Evaluation Norms

Norms for evaluating discourse may be absolute or variable. Absolute norms apply where the data is restricted as to what is acceptable, such as in the response to a specific comprehension question or the appropriate thematic and new-given information structure for a given context. For example, "It was your food that John took" is not an appropriate response to the question "Who took my food?" as the given information from the question 'food' is treated as new information and the question expects the subject and not the object to be thematic. The norms for texts, on the other hand, must be statistical since appropriateness in a text permits greater latitude for variation. Since absolute norms are generally known in language testing, I will only discuss the use of statistical norms for evaluating text production.

There are numerous variables that will determine the dimensions of the norms. These variables relate either to the speaker, such as age and degree of education, or to discourse factors such as type of discourse, mode and degree of formality. The age of the speaker is an important variable in that competence in specific linguistic skills may develop in an order sequence

(Gonzalez 1979) so that one should not evaluate a speaker on the basis of skills that are beyond his maturation level. The degree of education also affects discourse production. Many new literates follow an oral style of writing which is replaced by a written style as their writing skills progress. Discourse varieties are significant in that they utilize different forms according to the type of information that is being conveyed and the assumed knowledge of the audience. For example, the use of 'and as a result', in "He cut a tree and as a result it fell" sounds pedantic in a narrative with an audience that is familiar with cutting trees. However, the use of 'and as a result' is very appropriate in an explanatory text in which the speaker is informing people as to the relation between mosquitoes and malaria. The norms for written discourse are different from those for oral discourse. In the same way, the standards of appropriateness for informal discourse vary from those for formal discourse.

The norms for discourse production are established on stylo-statistical principles (Grimes 1963; Enkvist 1973). Using an adequate data base, ranges of variation are determined for specific discourse features in each discourse variety. The combination of the ranges for these different features provides a profile for that specific discourse type. The discourse of the person whose discourse performance is being evaluated would be compared to the norm and if his performance was outside the acceptable range, then corrective instruction could be implemented to meet his specific need. This evaluation procedure is more objective than what is generally practiced in writing and speech classes where the instructor's norms are more intuitive. With intuitive norms objective evaluation and the implementation of specific corrective measures are more difficult.

For the purposes of illustration, let us look at two hypothetical profiles for narrative and explanatory discourse using as diagnostic features past tense, clause repetition, and the use of prominent forms for the cause-result relation. The feature past tense specifies the percentage of independent verbs with past tense. Clause repetition refers to a cohesive device by which the last clause of a sentence is repeated at the beginning of the following sentence. This is a common feature of many Papua New Guinea narratives. The prominent cause-result feature refers to the percentage of explicit forms for specifying the semantic cause-result relation such as 'and so', 'as a result', and 'because of that' out of the total number of occurrences of this semantic relationship in a text. Figure 1 gives the hypothetical norm for narrative discourse and Figure 2 the norm for explanatory discourse.

	Percentage					
	0	20	40	60	80	100
Past Tense					XXXXXXX	
Clause Repetition			XXXXX			
Prominent Cause-Result	XXXX					

Figure 1 Feature Norms for Narrative Discourse

	Percentage					
	0	20	40	60	80	100
Past Tense	XXXX					
Clause Repetition		XXXXX				
Prominent Cause-Result			XXXX			

Figure 2 Feature Norms for Explanatory Discourse

In our hypothetical example narrative discourse has as a norm from 70% to 85% of its main verbs in the past tense whereas an explanatory text has as a norm only 0% to 10%. When the text of a student varies to any degree from this normative range for verbs then corrective instruction could be given. Such an evaluative norm would need to be used with discretion as there may be individual differences in style or embedded sections of text that skew the statistics.

In the last decade studies in discourse have contributed significantly to our understanding of what it means to be competent in a language. Many of these contributions have been incorporated into language instruction and evaluation programs. However, much ground remains to be covered in understanding the systems in discourse, in devising programs to teach these systems and in providing tools adequate to evaluate discourse competence and performance.

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